THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Mary's Yes
December 12, 1999

John M. Buchanan

"We light this candle as a sign of the coming light of Christ. Advent means coming. We are preparing ourselves for the day the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing."

Almighty God, you have made us and all things to serve you, now prepare the world for your rule. Come quickly to save us, so that wars and violence shall end, and your children may live in peace, honoring one another with justice and love; through Jesus Christ, who lives in power with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

The Book of Common Worship
The Lighting of the Advent Candle
The Third Sunday in Advent

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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MARY'S YES

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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"Mary said, 'Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38)

Dear God, as the pace quickens, and as we feel within us anxiety that we will not get it all done, give us moments of quiet and peace. Amidst all the sounds of preparing for Christmas, help us hear your voice in the voice of the poor, in the voices of children and familiar hymns. Come, O God, and make your advent in our hearts. Amen

> "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of this kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her." (Luke 1:26-38 NRSV)

Who would blame her for saying "No," for declining this particular honor, for simply walking away?

Author Reynolds Price has written an account of her experience as part of a commission from *Time Magazine* to write a new gospel based both on the most current biblical and historical scholarship, and his own literary imagination. The result is in the December 6 issue of *Time*.

Price is a person of thoughtful faith who has lived through the fire of serious, life threatening illness, constant pain, and permanent disability. He loves the gospels as

literature. He argues with skeptical biblical scholars who think there is more metaphor and symbolism than history, and he approaches the story with a kind of profound literary respect and spiritual trust.

I'd like simply to read how he tells the story of Mary—whom he calls Miriam, the Hebrew form of her name:

> "In the slit-eyed world of a country village, the boy's mother Miriam conceived him mysteriously. Promised in marriage to Yosef the builder, she found herself pregnant without explanation—she had known no man, not intimately. Steeped in the malice of small-town talk, she knew not to tell the story she believed—God's archangel Gabriel had visited her at the village well one early-spring morning as she lifted her jar to climb back home.
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> He had looked very much like an actual man . . . his voice plainly said, 'I'm Gabriel, from God, to ask if you'll agree to let him make on you his only son.'
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> When she hesitated, assuming that this was some evil joke, the voice spoke again: 'You're free to refuse, and I'm free to tell you that should you accept, your life will last much longer than most, and long years of it will feel like no pain other humans know . . .'
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> But before he finished that, she looked well past him—the rim of the skyline back of his shoulders—and there was an odd cloud forming itself in the shape of a dark bird rushing toward her. She met the angel's eyes again, gave an awkward nod and said, 'I'm Miriam. Let me be God's slave.'
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> So the boy grew up—she called him Yeshu from his full name, Yeshua—in the same narrow town: one narrow lane, two rows of rock houses, sealed with mud and roofed with branches daubed with mud, and each house full of the mouths he could hear saying 'Bastard, Miriam's bastard boy, God's big baby!'
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> His mother's story had leaked out somehow, likely through Yosef, who claimed that he had dreamed it but nonetheless married her, took in Yeshu and made other sons and daughters on her body.
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> By the time Yeshu grew to full manhood—the blacksmith in Yosef's building concern and the best smith in Galilee—he was still called bastard in Nazareth whispers. He had never heard Yosef deny the charge, nor even his mother, who told him only, 'They're not completely right.'"

Who would blame her if she said 'No.'?

Her son, Reynolds Price wrote in the introduction to the article, is the most important individual in all of human history.

Mary, his mother, is the only person who knew him and was with him every single day of the 33 years that constituted his brief life. She walked and road on a donkey for five days

at the end of her pregnancy. She bore him in difficult circumstances, miles from her home. She lived under the same roof with him for thirty years. And in the tumultuous final three years of his life, she accompanied him and his small band of followers as they walked through the countryside and villages of Galilee and perhaps even moved from her home in Nazareth to preside over the little house in Capernaum where he established his headquarters. She was walking with him when he entered the city of Jerusalem the week before the passover. She was in the crowd when he was arrested and tried and she was there as he was crucified. She watched as her son died and one of the last things he said was about her, as he asked his friend to take care of her.

And she is among the believers as the infant church was born. She is the second most important person in the story. Artists, more than theologians, have understood her prominence in the Christian tradition and have painted and sculpted and written many of the artistic treasures of our civilization with her as subject—Michelangelo's Pieta—a mother cradling the body of her dead and beloved son; Fra Angelico's The Annunciation—in the monastery of San Marcos in Florence, a stunningly beautiful expression of the mystery and grace and courage of her experience; and of course, musically, Ave Maria.

She is missing from much of our tradition and practice and liturgy. Until Christmas, that is, and then she shows up finally in the Cresche, and on countless Hallmark cards, romanticized, of course, looking, someone quipped recently, as if she just returned from having her hair and nails done, to discover this chubby perfect little baby waiting for her.

Peter Gomes says we Protestants aren't sure what to do with her because we think she's a Catholic. Gomes tells the old story about a former Dean of St. Paul's in London—and you can substitute any prominent Protestant preacher/teacher/theologian—who arrives in heaven. Jesus comes down from God's right hand and says, 'Ah, Mr. Dean, welcome to heaven; I know you have met my Father, but I don't believe you know my Mother." (*Sermons, Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living,* p.11)

The problem is that Mary became the point person in Protestant-Catholic conflict after the Reformation. Protestants swept away much of the accumulated tradition of the Saints, and since Mary had become the object of devotion, veneration, prayers, shrines, pilgrimages, hymns, sacred relics—bits of her hair, patches of clothing, vials of her milk, had shown up in churches all over Europe—Protestantism swept all that away and she simply disappeared from Protestant piety altogether. And as often happens historically, stimulus evokes response; thesis prompts antithesis, Hegel said. One over-reaction almost always generates another, even more grandiose overaction. So the Roman Catholic tradition responded to Protestantism's insulting dismissal of Mary by focusing ever more strongly on her and her role in faith. She became the Queen of Heaven, Mother of God, a current push in the church is to make her co-redemptrix with Jesus—which prompted my friend Sheila Gustavson to quip that before you know it the Holy Trinity will be the Holy Quartet.

I continue to be intrigued. She was with him every day. Princeton scholar Beverly Gaventa asks us not to forget who nurtured him, taught him about love and compassion, maybe even told him childhood stories that later became his parables. (See *The Christian Century,* 12/15/99 "Mary's Story, Grace and Disruption," p.1214)

Art has done it for me—provided an avenue into the theology and faith which she represents and enables. It was that picture I referred to—Fra Angelico's Annunciation. He was a 15th century monk who decorated the walls of his monastery with some of the world's most exquisite art. One of the frescoes is the famous Annunciation.

Frederick Buechner wrote about the moment,

> "she struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child . . . he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl." (*Peculiar Treasures, A Biblical Who's Who,* p. 39)

The artist painted the angel as a lovely but ordinary person, looking a lot like Mary. And the angel is waiting—not only announcing but waiting for Mary's answer. So, it's more than an annunciation actually. It's God acting—initiating—proposing—and then waiting for human response.

Mary is startled, afraid. Angels always evoke fear first, and the first thing they say is always, "Fear not." Mary's response is normal—"I'm hearing from God—I must have done something wrong." So the angel reassures her—"You haven't done anything wrong. You have found favor with God." The point is not that Mary is being punished, nor that she is being rewarded, but that God will do something through her, God has chosen her—ordinary, poor, young, non-descript, non-important, non-person. God chose her for God's own reasons which she certainly didn't understand. And that is precisely the point.

But there is a basic problem. Mary is already betrothed, promised to a man by the name of Joseph who has entered into a legal contract with her family, one of the conditions of which is her virginity. Her pregnancy will be a very big problem. The law regards her as already married and in some places in Palestine, betrothal meant sexual activity. But Joseph knows there has been none, at least involving him. So when she becomes pregnant, he does a very good thing—instead of reporting her to the authorities and suing her family, he decides to divorce her quietly . And then he does something even better, decides to trust her, to believe her story about God and the Holy Spirit and the child, to stay with her, to be father to the child he knows is not his.

So Mary's response is at the center of all this. Who would blame her for saying 'No,' for walking away from it all?

Some have suggested that her response, particularly the servant or slave of the Lord part is a product of masculine domination and the submissive subjugation of women and the culturally mandated submission of women to men.

Peter Gomes' analysis is helpful. Gomes is an African-American, and therefore intimately familiar with subjugation by the dominant culture, often based on passages in the Bible. Gomes nevertheless thinks our problem with her response is that it's so out of sync with our culture—a culture that puts the highest premium, not on submitting to anything, but

expressing oneself, not volunteering to adopt someone else's agenda; but doing your own thing when you want to do it; not, God forbid, putting our own agenda aside to give ourselves to anyone else's, certainly not God's. Mary's 'Yes' sounds strange to us.

Mary's response, her 'Yes' to God is the deepest affirmation of who she is, I believe. I believe her 'Yes' to God, her willingness to be an instrument of God, suggests her own grace and faith, but is a model for you and me.

Gomes writes,

"She affirms the promise that is within her, and that is no more submissive . . . than it was for Bach to write the music that he had been given to write, for Rembrandt to paint with the gift that was given to him, or for Mother Theresa to do the work she was called to do." (p.14)

What all this means—what she means—is that God, in mysterious ways that are beyond our understanding, comes into history, into your history and my history: God comes to ordinary, non-descript, sometimes young, sometimes old, sometimes rich, sometimes poor, sometimes powerful, oftentimes weak, people with an agenda, a plan, an assignment, a gift.

What all this means is that God waits for our response.

What all this means is that with God, in the memorable words of Gabriel, "Nothing is impossible," a phrase Fred Craddock says is the Creed behind all creeds: With God, nothing is impossible.

And so, given the mysterious annunciation to Mary and her brave, definitive "yes," the question for you and me is this—what gift have you been given which is awaiting your answer: where has God come to you with a gift, an agenda, a task to do?

What music is in you that needs to be sung?

What poetry is in your heart that needs to be written?

What love is in you—that God is waiting for you to be vulnerable enough to express, courageous enough to say, graceful enough to demonstrate?

What generosity is in you that God is patiently waiting for you to discover and give?

What important decision needs to be made—what new venture begun—what new life change initiated?

Where are you pregnant with possibility and hope?

Kathleen Norris wrote about Mary. "She does not lose her voice but finds it . . . 'Here am I.' . . . Mary proceeds—as we must do in life—making her commitments without knowing much about what it will entail or where it will lead. I treasure the story because it forces

me to ask: When the mystery of God's love breaks through into my consciousness, do I run from it? Do I ask of it what I cannot answer? Shrugging, do I retreat into facile cliches, . . . Or am I virgin enough to respond from my deepest, truest self, and say something new, a 'yes' that will change me forever?" (*The Book of Women's Sermons,* Lee Hancock, Editor, "Annunciation: On Mystery," p. 186)

When God's love breaks through into your consciousness, what will you do? How will you answer?

It will happen this season. It always does—and when it does, may you find deep within you, the grace and trust and courage to echo the words of that young girl, startled by God, the mother of Jesus, who said 'Yes.'

Amen.

Prayers of the People
December 12, 1999
The Reverend Dana Ferguson

Gracious God, from whom we receive the gift of life, in whom we learn the meaning of life and to whom we owe the glory of life, we praise your holy name. You cause the heavens to be glad and the earth to rejoice, because you come as no other comes: you come as righteousness and truth.

You come as the God of creation, and you remain as the God of the chosen. O God of the Marys and the Josephs who when you come upon them, find that they cannot easily return to their own city; that their place in the world has been redefined; come to us. O God of the shepherds who when your glory appears around them discover that they can no longer regard their field and their flocks in quite the same, come to us. O God of those who, hearing your song in the heavens, seek your presence on earth, come to us reminding us that your grace appears for all. Inspire us, O God, that we too are your chosen ones, chosen to serve in your name. Fill us with the light of hope and peace and love for we seek you not only for ourselves but also for the many hurts and doubts and longings among us. Remind us that you have chosen us to minister in your name and equip us that we will with great boldness and compassion comfort the grieving, befriend the lonely, offer peace to the conflicted and courage to the fearful.

In this season of Advent, come to us that we, too, might not return to our homes the same. Just as people of old were surprised by a lowly baby, when they expected a mighty ruler, grant us a picture of our lives that is graphically full of humility and grace. As the shepherds came to understand their flocks in a new way, give us a vision of our place of service in your kingdom, among your flock. As we survey the world that awaits its savior, lift the scales from our eyes that we might behold the people for whom Christ became flesh. As the Word became flesh for us, let the Word become flesh through us. Send us home, O God, in the assurance that the power of the Most High will overshadow us as it did Mary. Then, when your surprises burst upon us, we shall greet them as Mary did hers, in the spirit of faithful surrender, saying, "let it be to us according to your will." We pray this and all things in the name of the one to come...